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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HARARE 000856

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM ELAB PGOV ASEC ZI

SUBJECT: WAITING FOR GOD OR SADC: VIOLENT FARM SEIZURES,
DISPLACEMENTS INCREASE

REF: HARARE 760

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Poloff visits to farms in central Zimbabwe confirmed continuing invasions of white-owned commercial farms by ZANU-PF supporters, and associated violence and displacement of black Zimbabwean farm workers. Police have refused to intervene. Although politically-motivated violence has decreased since 2008, land-related violence in violation of Zimbabwean and SADC court orders is increasing. Farmers and farm workers have no recourse as the government refuses to act to uphold its own court rulings. Thousands of black Zimbabweans have already been displaced by the farm invasions, and thousands more may be displaced in the coming weeks and months. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The Commercial Farmers Union has told us that of the 4,500 white farmers in Zimbabwe before the land invasions, only 300-400 remain. Of those, at least half are engaged in protracted legal battles which contribute to significant slow-downs on those farms that are productive. The international media has historically focused on the plight of white farm owners; this was portrayed by ZANU-PF as proof positive of a racist western attitude toward Zimbabwe. However, the greater and growing human rights and humanitarian tragedy is the massive upheaval that black Zimbabwean farm workers continue to suffer in the name of land reform, the hallmark of the ZANU-PF party platform. According to the local International Organization for Migration (IOM) office, at least 4,500 farm workers and their families have been displaced since the beginning of the year as a result of the takeovers of white commercial farms. The average family size in Zimbabwe is five

people, meaning that nearly 25,000 Zimbabweans have likely been displaced in 2009 alone. In comparison, IOM estimated that at least 30,000 Zimbabweans were displaced in election-related violence in 2008.

13. (SBU) The soon-to-be released film "House of Justice" (Reftel) documents human rights abuses suffered by black farm workers. After viewing this film, on October 21 and 22, poloffs visited farm workers and owners of five different farms near Chegutu (Mashonaland West province) and Kwekwe (Midlands province) in central Zimbabwe. All have come under serious threat since the beginning of 2009, and, in a disturbing new trend, black farm workers have been increasingly targeted for beatings, threats, and forced evictions by the "new owners." Just a day after we met with a farmer whose property is protected by a recent SADC ruling against interference by ZANU-PF, his farm was invaded by dozens of drunk ZANU-PF supporters who launched a tense, ongoing standoff with the owners that police Qlaunched a tense, ongoing standoff with the owners that police refuse to address (septel).

Workers Threatened, Evicted,
Struggling to Survive

14. (SBU) In Chegutu, the District Organizer for the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), Edward Dzeka, led us to several affected farms where we met workers.

Of the twelve white-owned farms in Chegutu, only one has not yet been targeted. We first visited the Mt. Carmel farm owned by Ben Freeth and his father-in-law Mike Campbell. Campbell was the lead

HARARE 00000856 002 OF 004

plaintiff in a major court case in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal that declared the Zimbabwean government's land reform policy unconstitutional, in part because it is based on race. In the November 2008 ruling, the Tribunal ordered that farm invasions by ZANU-PF against the 78 plaintiffs must cease and that the government compensate dispossessed farm owners by June 30, 2009.

Subsequent to the Court's decision, in September 2009, the homes of Campbell and Freeth at Mt. Carmel, once the largest producer of export-quality mangos in Zimbabwe, were burned.

15. (SBU) We hoped to speak with Freeth's farm workers who lived on a compound just adjacent to the house. On arrival at Freeth's property, we were met by a lone man who told us that the house now belonged to ZANU-PF spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira. When we asked about the farm workers - since nobody else was around - he said they had "gone into town."

16. (SBU) Down the road at the compound adjacent to Campbell's home (which had also been taken over by Shamuyarira - as noted by a ZANU-PF campaign poster with the slogan "Our Land, Our Sovereignty" now attached to his gate), we met with the Mt. Carmel farm workers. They told us that the workers who lived near Freeth's house had been evicted the day before after repeated threats. The plight of the Mt. Carmel farm workers was immediately evident. Although it was a school day, numerous children roamed aimlessly and their parents explained that they could not pay the US\$3 fees for the nearby public school. The workers told us they had not been paid in three months and that they survived through intermittent piecework on nearby farms.

17. (SBU) Some of the workers continue to help graze Campbell's cattle. A foreman said he had been at Mt. Carmel since 1978 and didn't know where he would go if evicted. With the takeover of Campbell's home, he and the other 70 workers and their families also lost access to the farm's four boreholes. Now the destitute workers must trek roughly a mile to take water from a borehole on an adjacent farm. Bruce Campbell, Mike Campbell's son, told us the last of the four boreholes had broken and that police refused to help him move the remaining 20 cattle from his farm. He feared that unless action was taken soon, the cattle would die from dehydration.

18. (SBU) When we asked the Mt. Carmel workers if anyone from

government had come to visit them to ask about their plight, one woman laughed and sighed, "Ah, no. You are the only ones."

¶19. (SBU) Further down the road at the Wakefield tobacco farm, home to approximately 1500 farmworkers and their families, manager Charles Jongwe showed us the eviction papers delivered to him and QCharles Jongwe showed us the eviction papers delivered to him and the other workers on October 19. The owner, Ken Bartholomew, was in Harare for the day working with his lawyer to block the evictions, though the foreman expressed doubt that any court order would be respected in light of the experience of other white farm owners in Zimbabwe. Jongwe explained that his former house, directly adjacent to the farm's workshop, was now occupied by surrogates for the new "owner," Felix Pambukani. Jongwe told us that the take-over attempts began in February 2009, and that he was jailed for 48 hours in April and accused of "being violent" although the police did not press charges against him.

¶10. (SBU) Jongwe told us that the once-productive tobacco farm now lay idle as Pambukani's men refused to allow the workers to plant this year's crop, which needed to be in the ground by the end of

HARARE 00000856 003 OF 004

November. Although most of last year's crop was sold, some rotted in the curing sheds because of interference from Pambukani. Pambukani's men recently sprayed herbicide on the seedlings they intended to plant in an attempt to completely derail this year's planting. Wakefield's employees fear for the future, having seen the fate of the workers at the nearby Mt. Carmel farm. Since they are unable to work, they spend their days keeping watch over the farm's assets, bracing for a possible violent invasion.

It's Worth Crying Over Spilled Milk

¶11. (SBU) Rob Taylor, whose plight at Usasa Seedling farm near Chegutu is featured in "House of Justice," told us that before the last invasions between February and June, at one of the two farms he managed, he had 138 cows. During the forced takeover, the invaders refused to allow Taylor's workers to feed 17 calves, all of which died. 30 other cows died from neglect, and the invaders intentionally killed his bull, worth about US\$4,000. He had managed to move 60 cows to a field owned by the Pentecostal Church, but only because he had convinced the invaders that he was selling the cows as he moved them off the property. On October 16, when he attempted to retrieve his last 20 cows, the invaders at the farm stoned his truck, and one of the stones injured his driver in the ribs.

¶12. (SBU) The "new owner," Tendai Chasaoka forcibly took over the farm in January with a purported government "offer letter." Since January, Chasaoka, who is the director of the Chegutu Grain Marketing Board, has forced Taylor to pay the electricity bills and wages of the remaining eight workers. Taylor told us on October 21 that he needed to get money to pay them the next day, but he still didn't know where he would get it. Taylor lamented that although the farm was protected by high court orders and the SADC tribunal ruling, and although he had given up the fight for the farm in order to save his remaining herd, he continued to be the victim of extortion, intimidation and violent attacks.

¶13. (SBU) Taylor, in true Zimbabwean fashion, has "made a plan" for the future. He told us that if he could get milk pasteurizing and packaging equipment, he could sell the milk his remaining 60 cows are producing. Currently, because of erratic electricity and a breakdown at the local Dairy Board, most of his cows' milk goes to waste. He estimates the equipment and installation would cost US\$15,000, which he could probably pay off in six months. However, since no bank will accept his cows as collateral, his plan remains stalled until he can find a source for the loan. While Taylor, like others, welcomes dollarization for the stability it has brought to the economy, he lamented the continued lack of coins and its impact on the local economy. He explained that a pint of milk sells for 50 cents, and the lack of change continues to deter planned purchases

of less than a dollar, particularly in rural areas.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Although farm invasions were most widespread and violent in 2000 and 2001, remaining farmers are subject to intimidation and violence. Racism and inequality have always plagued Zimbabwe and the continued racial treatment of the land issue by ZANU-PF has

HARARE 00000856 004 OF 004

resulted in reluctance from the international community and even the MDC, who are most susceptible to ZANU-PF's rhetoric, to speak out for fear of appearing to support wealthy white farmers. Significantly, however, farm workers - black Zimbabweans - are now the primary targets of these attacks as they become an increasingly victimized and overlooked population

¶15. (SBU) The SADC Tribunal ruling in November 2008 was a significant victory for the Campbells and other dispossessed farmers. The Zimbabwean government's decision to ignore the ruling and pull out of the Tribunal is continued evidence of the absence of rule of law. It is also disturbing that SADC countries have allowed Zimbabwe to flout the ruling of their court. As one of the farm workers says at the end of "House of Justice," "only God or SADC can help us." END COMMENT.

PETTERSON